



Connecticut joins education standards movement

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Until now, when schoolchildren in the 50 states studied math and English, they have been held to 50 different standards. What fifth-graders learn in Connecticut is not always the same as what they learn in Kansas.

That is about to change.

The State Board of Education voted unanimously Wednesday to adopt the Common Core State Standards, making Connecticut the latest state to join a national movement toward a more uniform set of academic goals.



Mark McQuillan

"It's really the first time we've had standards in math and English language arts that are national. . . . It is pretty historic," said Harriet Feldlaufer, chief of the Bureau of Teaching and Learning at the State Department of Education.

"Given the mobility of families and students [among states], there was not an equal set of standards," she said. "It really depended on where you live."

The common standards were released recently by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. They were designed "to consist of fewer, clearer and high-level standards [and] to be aligned with college and work expectations," Education Commissioner Mark McQuillan wrote in a summary for the state board.

Along with a sweeping education reform law that took effect this month, the adoption of common curriculum standards is another effort to bolster the quality of the state's public schools. In the

1990s, Connecticut led the nation in performance on nationwide tests of reading, writing and math but since then has slipped behind some other states, most notably Massachusetts.

All states except Alaska and Texas took part in developing the new common standards. So far, nearly two dozen states have formally adopted the standards, and more are expected to do so.

"Twenty-one states, as of [Wednesday]," said Michael Cohen, president of Achieve, Inc., a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit education reform group that is a partner in the Common Core State Standards movement.

More states are expected to approve the common standards by Aug. 2 in order to improve their standing in the competition for federal grants in the Obama administration's Race to the Top school reform program. Connecticut is competing with 34 other states and the District of Columbia for the grants.

Officials say the standards are not expected to lead to a national curriculum but will serve as a guideline for states and local districts to shape curriculum, train new teachers and improve professional training for veteran teachers.

"Connecticut, like other states, has pretty strong local control. I don't think that's going to change," Cohen said, "but there will probably be higher quality opportunities for school districts in Connecticut and other states to work together."

The common standards also could lead to joint development of tests, he said. Currently, state tests differ widely from one state to another, making comparisons nearly impossible. "Instead of having 50 different tests in 50 states, we might be headed toward having a couple of tests," Cohen said.

The new standards, in many cases, are closely aligned with existing standards in Connecticut, state officials say. A review by Connecticut educators concluded that 80 percent of the common English standards and more than 90 percent of common math standards match existing Connecticut standards.

Where standards do not match, the differences are often subtle, sometimes a matter of when certain skills are taught. In math, for example, the new common standards call for students to learn to multiply and divide fractions in fifth grade, a skill that is introduced in sixth grade under existing Connecticut standards.

Similarly, while first-graders are expected to learn to use adjectives and action verbs under Connecticut's standards, the new common standards are more specific, asking children to

distinguish shades of meaning among verbs such as "look," "peek," "glance," "stare," "glare" and "scowl," for example.

The new guidelines are expected to influence local districts as they review curriculum and conduct professional training programs for teachers, state officials said.

"Districts are going to have to look very carefully at what they're teaching, when they teach it, and how they teach," Feldlaufer said.

The standards also could be helpful in measuring readiness for college, said state Higher Education Commissioner Michael Meotti. "Every year, thousands come to community colleges and Connecticut State University campuses, and way too many need remediation," he said.

Susan Iwanicki-Smith, supervisor of instruction for kindergarten through fifth grade in Bristol Public Schools, said the district will take the new standards into consideration as it revises its curriculum.

But, she said, "In Bristol, we have a pretty strong curriculum, so it may not affect us as much."

Nevertheless, she added, "Personally, I think we should have some sort of national standard. Otherwise, how are we as a nation going to progress?" She said the common standards will help schools know where they stand. "I don't think that's a bad thing," she said.